

"March 18, 1986," from Alain Badiou, *Malebranche: The Seminar of Alain Badiou (Being 2—The Theological Figure, 1986)*

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translated by jason e. smith

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*The text we have the pleasure of presenting here is the translation of a chapter of Alain Badiou's recently published *Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique, 1986* (The Seminar. Malebranche: Being 2. Theological figure, 1986). As this title should make clear, the volume in question represents the corrected transcript of a seminar Alain Badiou gave on the subject of Nicolas Malebranche's philosophy in the first half of 1986. The seminar consisted of six sessions that met over the course of roughly two and half months, from March 11 to May 27; translated here is the third of those meetings. This session, like much of the rest of the seminar, is devoted to what is perhaps Malebranche's signature philosophical work, the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680).*

*Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique, 1986 was originally published in 2013 by Librairie Arthème Fayard, as the second installment of what will eventually be a complete edition of Badiou's seminars published under the title *Le Séminaire*. The series opens with his 1983-84 seminar on the philosophical category of the "One" and its development in the thought of Plato, Descartes, and Kant; it will continue up to the present. The seminar on Malebranche is therefore the second volume to appear within the series that will constitute *The Seminar*, though it was in fact published simultaneously with the volume Badiou chose to initiate the series with: his 1994-95 seminar on Jacques Lacan (*Le Séminaire. Lacan: l'antiphilosophie 3, 1994-95*). The pages that*

follow are the first of Badiou's Seminar to be appear in English.

As the subtitle of this seminar on Malebranche also indicates, the trimester spent examining Treatise on Nature and Grace forms a part of one cycle within the seminar series, dedicated to the thought of Being. This cycle would examine three moments or "figures" of Being: an inaugural, "ontological" figure (Parmenides, 1985), a second, "theological," figure (Malebranche), and a final variation, the modern "withdrawal" of Being (Heidegger, 1986-87). This cycle can be seen, in turn, as part of a larger group of seminars, conducted between 1983 and 1987, consecrated to the "history of the thinking of being." This grouping includes, in addition to the cycle on Being and the seminar on the One, still another seminar dedicated to the category of the Infinite as it is articulated in the thought of Aristotle, Spinoza and Hegel (1984-85).

*Readers of Badiou will note that the five years during which these seminars on Being, the One, and the Infinite were conducted coincide with the years, following the publication of *Théorie du sujet* in 1982, during which he was also composing his 1988 philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Event*. These readers will also note that the One and the Infinite are central themes in the radical transformation of ontology undertaken in the first three parts of that same book. All of the proper names evoked in these seminars will warrant considerable analyses in that same book, often entire chapters. All except one: the name Malebranche does not appear once in its hundreds of pages.*

*In his preface to the seminar on Malebranche, Badiou writes that this "seminar is the only one in my entire career which, from the point of view of the construction of my own system, has been of no use to me."² Nevertheless, within the economy of Badiou's philosophical archaeology, the "theological figure of being" plays a crucial, mediating role: it sutures the power of the Infinite to the category of the One. The ontotheological synthesis of the One and the Infinite is, in this sense, the exemplary figure of what Badiou calls in the opening pages of *Being and Event* "the ontology of presence." If the examination of Malebranche's particular variation on this synthesis was of no use to Badiou from the perspective of the elaboration of his own philosophical work, the disintrication of these two categories is nevertheless a pivotal achievement of his system. It is the foundation on which the doctrine of the event and the theory of the subject are built.*

The choice of Malebranche—an author largely unknown outside of France—is a curious one. Badiou indicates in the preface to this seminar that he initially considered Leibniz's ontotheological ambitions to have been the self-evident choice, and that the decision to devote the seminar to Malebranche was a more or less contingent one. Leibniz, we should remember, was the subject of a seminar given by Gilles Deleuze just a year later, in the

first half of 1987; he would publish a book on Leibniz as a “baroque” thinker of the “fold” in 1988. Badiou, in his turn, similarly characterized Malebranche throughout his seminar as a philosopher of the baroque; in this volume, both Malebranche and Leibniz are grouped with Spinoza to form a network of paths taken in the wake of the Cartesian rupture in philosophy.

It is arguably Pascal, however, who plays the role of foil to Malebranche in this seminar. Pascal, we should recall, occupies a fundamental if often overlooked position in Badiou’s thought: in his status as one of four French “dialectical” thinkers (alongside Rousseau, Mallarmé, and Lacan) in whose lineage Badiou situates himself, and in the place his thought assumes in the “construction” of Badiou’s philosophical conceptuality in Being and Event. It is Pascal’s thought that provides the matrix for developing the two crucial subjective “operators” in his thought which provide the first mediations between the category of the event and the theory of the subject: intervention, and fidelity. Time and again, Pascal’s name appears in this seminar on Malebranche’s theory of grace. In turn, certain passages from the excerpt published here are closely echoed in the chapter in Being and Event on Pascal. The use to be made of this beautiful reconstruction of Malebranche’s theory of grace is therefore the portrait it draws of a thought that shares with Pascal the conditions of modern philosophy: the Galilean revolution in the natural sciences. Pascal and Malebranche share equally an ambition to think what a subject, a modern Christian subject, might be in a world that is “infinite and senseless.”³ In his response to this question, Malebranche is opposed to Pascal at every turn. It is this path said to lead nowhere—for contemporary thought—that Badiou wanders down, and explores, on the way to building one of the most powerful philosophical apparatuses of our time.

Alain Badiou’s Malebranche: The Seminar of Alain Badiou (Being 2—The Theological Figure, 1986) will be published by Columbia University Press in 2016.

—Jason E. Smith

MARCH 18, 1986

I ended our seminar last time by giving you the outline of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. I will return to this matter now in greater detail.

We have seen that Malebranche's architectonic construction involved three very clear and well-organized parts. Initially, he establishes the necessity and possibility of a mathematization of the problem, that is, a treatment of the question of grace homogeneous with the treatment of the question of nature. He will show that there are indeed two different orders—those of nature and of grace—but also that these two different orders do not derive from two different rationalities. We note here a point-by-point opposition to Pascal, for whom the difference between these orders is fundamentally a difference between the very principles of thought. We cannot think the order of charity in the same terms we think the order of reason. So for Pascal there is a break between principles of intelligibility, whereas for Malebranche there is none. The orders are distinct, but the principles that allow us to understand and articulate them are the same.

Second, Malebranche conducts a sort of study—which I called a “topological” study—of the question of grace, which leads him to distinguish between its “local” and “global” aspects. These are my own terms. Malebranche himself speaks of a “grace of feeling” and a “grace of enlightenment.” The structure is double, and we must think its articulation, an articulation that must be seen as referring in the last instance to the distinction among persons in God: the grace of feeling is assignable to Christ, to the Son, and the grace of enlightenment to the Father, the Creator. The topology of grace is founded on the distinction among persons in God, and therefore on a rationalized aspect of Trinitarian theology.

Third, Malebranche deals with the subjective effect of this double structure, that is, how grace acts in us, how it operates as a factor of subjective determination. This will take the form of the problem: what is the exact interaction, in a decision, between grace and freedom?

We are dealing here with a very recognizable procedure, one we can reformulate in modern terms as follows. First, we are dealing with the logic of the matheme, which means that grace and divine action are not exceptions to this logic; second, the examination of the particular mathemes involved in this matter, namely, the structures of grace; and third, the subjective determination. We therefore go from the symbolic to the subject, with the third movement being the real, that is, the

actualization of things. Only this third movement is actually real, since it is only there that we encounter grace *qua* grace, grasped in its actual occurrence and not just in its principle. This general movement organizes the layout of the work. Let me remind you that the first part, the First Discourse, is “On the Necessity of the General Laws of Nature and Grace,” a perfectly explicit title, and a part that is itself divided in two: “On the Necessity of the General Laws of Nature” and “On the Necessity of the General Laws of Grace.”

Before entering into the heart of the matter, I would like to emphasize once more Malebranche’s paradoxical radicalism. For, in the parallelism between nature and grace, between the general laws of nature and the general laws of grace, we might imagine that we will be dealing with a kind of naturalization of grace, that is, ultimately with a kind of absorption of the logic of grace into the general logic of nature. But in many respects it is the opposite. In Malebranche, the intelligibility of nature requires from the start parameters that are usually only brought into play when it is a matter of grace. But it is not a question of extending grace to the understanding of nature. It is rather that, starting with the comprehension of nature, we encounter concepts, parameters, and criteria that ordinarily come into play only when one is dealing with problems of grace, religion and salvation. In a way, the unification, the homogeneous mathematization, occurs on the basis of the Christian categories, including where nature is concerned. Rather than with a naturalization of grace, we are confronted with a Christianization of nature. The categories of Christianity have become concepts, necessary concepts, even for the intelligibility of the world. It should be understood that this thesis of homogeneity is, in comparison with our current thinking, a partly regressive movement, since it occurs not through the rational extension of the universe of nature to the universe of grace, but rather through a sort retroaction of the Christian categories on the understanding of the world itself. That’s what makes for Malebranche’s paradoxical singularity. But didn’t a certain Marxism assert that class struggle—the domain of politics—directly affects our comprehension of nature, that there was a proletarian science? And that the categories of politics—which is revolutionary grace—retroactively clarified the intelligibility of nature? Malebranchism can be found there where you least expect it....

We are now going to enter a bit into the architecture of all of this. As I have already had occasion to tell you, in a sense Malebranche’s whole philosophy is derived from a single axiom, the axiom that is precisely article 1 of the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. It is the first statement in it. Moreover, in later editions, Malebranche would write: “I have been able to begin the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*

with these words . . .”⁴ (“I have been able” meaning that it’s after the fact.) What follows is precisely the axiom I am speaking about, that is, article 1, which I will give you again, because you should constantly bear it in mind: “God, being able to act only for his own glory, and being able to find it only in himself, cannot have had any other plan in the creation of the world than the establishment of his Church.”⁵ Personally, I never tire of this statement. It is truly admirable in every way. It is perfectly audacious; it is truly radical. It should be examined in detail on its own terms

Right from the start, this axiom sets in motion the conceptual rationalization of the Christian categories. The enterprise gets underway with this statement, insofar as the necessity of Christ can immediately be deduced from it, thanks to a very simple reasoning used many times by Malebranche. The central mystery of Christianity, namely the incarnation of God on earth, and therefore the becoming finite of the infinite, is for him the first truth, the first clear principle. What is just as typical of Malebranche is that the famous mysteries of religion, run through his austere filter of conceptual rationalization, become the first principles of reason. The articles of faith that refer to an unfathomable mystery are for Malebranche the most luminous, clear, and necessary principles of reason in general.

Let’s ask ourselves first of all whom this axiom is formulated against, either implicitly or explicitly. Malebranche declares that God has created the world only in view of establishing his Church. As usual, this statement is directed at once against an opportunist and an extremist thesis. In our previous sessions we traced the militant context of this whole affair enough to understand what is at issue here. The opportunist thesis is that the world as it is, that is, the world as a natural, created, finite world, the world without the Church and without Christ, would already be quite enough to glorify God. This thesis maintains that the world is, after all, not so bad, that it contains enough marvels to bear witness to the glory of God, without having to go looking for the wonder of wonders that is God himself in the person of Christ.

There’s no need of that in order for the world to sing the glory of the heavens, and there is no shortage of preachers, Jesuit ones in particular, who say as much. In the eighteenth century you could hear it said that if you looked at the wing of an insect under a microscope, it was already so complicated, so subtle, so amazing, so marvelous, that it was clear that it was singing the glory of the Lord! This is what was called the apologetic of wonders, one of the great specialists of which was abbé Pluche, who put together entire books explaining how insects’ wings,

fossils, and everything that could be seen through a microscope and a telescope, all of this alone proved that God was required and celebrated by this accumulation of natural wonders. This is an opportunist thesis, to the extent that it obviously resembles the thesis that merely being a good inhabitant of this world suffices to sing the glory of God since, after all, the world already proclaims it. Therefore, if you inhabit this world properly, without committing any outrageous crimes, if you are in the natural order, if for example you are neither a deviant, nor a hardened criminal—someone who does harm to the world—in short, if you are a reasonable inhabitant of this world, you participate in the glory of the Lord. After all, if the wing of an insect sings the glory of God, I, a reasonable inhabitant of this natural universe, certainly sing it as well. This way offers many compromises, since all in all there's not much you have to do to honor God; it is enough to be of the world, to be truly and naturally of the world. Whence a whole doctrine that will consist in saying that, if you are naturally in agreement with the world, you are in good stead when it comes to salvation, and that you'd really have to commit anti-natural acts, acts that violate the laws of the world, to truly offend God and be damned. You can easily recognize the thesis, the broad liberal thesis, that amounts to saying that there are certainly many elect, since that's the norm. The elect are those people who do more or less what everyone else does.

Malebranche is against this thesis. He doesn't think that the world, the world as such, sings the glory of God, and this is so for one fundamental reason: this world, however you look at it, is finite compared with God, and—this is a thinking typical of the age—to the extent that the finite and the infinite are incommensurable, the finite in no way glorifies God. That God was able to create a finite world is the least of things; it doesn't bear witness to his greatness. It is important to understand that it is this absence of relationship, this dis-relationship, that precludes any glorification. The world does not glorify God because, if it did, this would mean that there would still be a relationship between God and his creation. But since creation as such is finite, there isn't any.

This touches on a very important point, namely that the world was created *ex nihilo*, from nothing. This is a dogmatic point, a creationist dogma, and an argument in favor of the opportunist thesis, which often comes down to saying that there is one thing that nevertheless attests to the glory of God, namely, the fact that he was capable of making something with nothing, which bears witness to his power. For Malebranche, this is not a convincing argument. That God can make something from nothing, that creation is *ex nihilo*, in no way bridges the vast gulf between the finite and the infinite. There is a very profound idea that plays an

implicit but fundamental role in Malebranche's thought, namely that, compared with the infinite, the nothing and the finite amount more or less to the same thing. The nothing, the *nihil* from which the world was made, from which God made the world, is not so different from the finite world itself. So there is little reason to be amazed that an infinite God created something *ex nihilo*, because what he brought out of nothingness, the world, is almost nothing. This shift from the nothing to the almost nothing is in no way miraculous enough to celebrate the greatness of God.

Two lessons can be learned from this. First, that Malebranche is acutely aware of the gulf between the finite and the infinite. His concept of the infinite is neither continuist, nor limited, and for that reason it is modern, meaning post-Galilean. The infinity of God is being taken in a radical sense. The second remark is that Malebranche is well aware that if you take the infinite in this radical sense, the finite is practically a category of the nothing. Consequently, creation *ex nihilo* is in no way a figure of invention adequate to the power of the infinite. In Malebranche's eyes, the pure creationist thesis might even mean, if you push it far enough, that God was perfectly content with creating this almost nothing that is the finite world, like a child playing at putting together simple, useless things. Far from testifying to his greatness, this thesis even undermines his glory. Indeed to the extent that God is, as we know, self-sufficient, such game-playing is not worthy of him, and does not do justice to the being of which he is the name.

This is where Malebranche would turn against the other clique, the clique of those who, defending the extremist thesis, maintain that the creation of the world is unintelligible for man. They of course agree that the finite world does not do justice to God and does not sing his glory, but they conclude from this that the creation of the world refers to the inscrutable nature of God's plans, which is a completely different thesis. In other words, for man, the existence of the world and thus his own existence refer ultimately to the arbitrariness of the divine will, which is not an intrinsic arbitrariness, but appears as such to the eyes of men. For men, the world is contingent, and it is impossible for them to recognize within it any necessity whatsoever. This is obviously Pascal's thesis. We are abandoned and thrown into a universe deprived of sense, and so we cannot put ourselves in the place of God. We haven't the slightest idea about his calculations and we can't account for the world. There is no doubt a reason for it from the point of view of divine wisdom and will, but it is inaccessible to us. Consequently, the vision I am calling extremist here is essentially a tragic vision, whereas the other one was a relatively comic one. It is tragic because, finally, the world and our belonging to the world

can only be navigated as fates, fates whose source, whose root, is uninterpretable and within which one must hope for salvation in conditions of abandonment, absurdity, and nonsense. The apologetics, to the mind of the Pascalians, the Jansenists, or the Calvinists, was no longer in any way an apologetics of wonder. On the contrary, the apologetics would begin with absolute contingency, with the fateful tragedy of our existence, in order to show that it is only by assuming an incomprehensible will, an absolute and incalculable transcendence, that effect of sense can be drawn from it. Or to show that non-sense part of sense. But there is something irreducible about non-sense—it can be displaced, but it is always part of sense. The world has no sense, it is God who gives it one. But God himself has no sense. What I mean by this is a sense that we could master, a sense that we might exhibit or bring to light. Consequently, this type of apologetic is always dialectical, insofar as it includes non-sense in the movement of sense.

Malebranche can therefore not agree with this thesis either, an irrationalist thesis that does not satisfy the requirements of modern rationalism. We thereby see the extent to which the debate between Pascal and Malebranche became fundamental, starting in the seventeenth century. It in fact bore on the question of what was modern, that is, on the intellectual essence of the new times. It was a question that all of their contemporaries were acutely aware of. In the case of Pascal and Malebranche, the question was more precise: it was a matter of what, for Christians, was the intellectual essence of the new times. There were obviously those who would think that it consisted in getting rid of Christianity, a tendency that would be largely dominant during the eighteenth century among the intelligentsia. But, in a certain sense, this vision was a bit limited, for it would eventually be content with a combination of materialism and deism. From the point of view of the future of thought and philosophy, the more profound responses would be the ones given by those who asked what the essence of this new era was for a Christian. For, being confronted with a more radical intellectual challenge, they would have to forge and invent concepts and categories whose impact would be felt only later, even for those who would consider Christianity to be outmoded. They would invent categories of the dialectic, of tragic thought, and of subjectivity. This would entail an extremely intense conceptual and philosophical effort, because there was no short answer to the question of what it meant to remain a Christian in the conditions of modern scientific rationalism.

The debate between Pascal and Malebranche dealt at bottom with just this. It is clear that Pascal's response was: modernity, for a Christian, meant tracing the limits of rationalism. It was not a matter of dragging one's feet, as the backwards

Scholastics were doing, of continuing to oppose Galileo with Aristotle, and so on; it was a matter of immediately undertaking the work of limiting scientific rationalism. And that was the theory of orders. As a mathematician, as a physicist, an accomplished scholar, Pascal was nothing like a backward Scholastic and he felt justified in expressing his thoughts on the matter of the limits of rationality. He would find these limits in the concept of the subject, and he would bring to light how it was torn between different orders, the split that separated the order of reason from that of the heart. It was in the exploration of this split that he deployed the inventions of modern Christianity. Pascal and his supporters were at the root of a subjectivo-dialectical filiation, whose formal matrices went well beyond Christianity, and therefore well beyond what for them was its key issue.

Malebranche's response was diametrically opposed. It consisted in rationalizing Christianity rather than undertaking, from the perspective of Christianity, the work of drawing out the limits of modern scientific rationalism. His aim, let me repeat, was to show that modern scientific rationalism was homogeneous with Christianity. And since Christianity had anticipated this rationality, when it emerged it was seen as being homogeneous with Christianity, it was possible to maintain that Christianity as such was a blind anticipation of modern rationalism. This was of course why Malebranche, ultimately, could only be hostile to the extremist solution, to the tragic solution: unbearable transcendence, nonsense an integral part of sense In other words, he absolutely rejected the thesis of the contingency of the world. His deepest conviction was that if you do not contend that the world must have a reason, the modern rationalists will be quick to say that all of it, the miracles, the Incarnation and so forth are nothing but mysteries and nonsense, old wives' tales. This already anticipated Voltaire's polemic that none of it held up. So it was necessary to take the lead and show that the world, from the point of view of Christianity, had a reason, and that it was even only from the perspective of Christianity that it had a reason. This moreover allowed you to turn the question of contingency back on the atheists and libertines. Malebranche's strong position consisted in saying: I have a doctrine of the reason of the world, whereas you claim scientific rationalism. That's all very well, but do you know how to respond to the question of why the world is the way it is and not otherwise, why it exists, etc.? Absolutely not. Therefore, the one who is limiting rationality is not me, the Christian, but you. With regard to the trial of rationalism, Malebranche reversed the burden of proof. In the end, he summoned the atheist, the libertine, the nascent materialist, to sort out the questions of contingency and the absurd. Whereas he, for his part, showed, that Christianity deployed a coher-

ent doctrine of the reason of the world.

There you have in broad strokes the polemical site of Malebranche's thesis, opposed as it is both to laxist opportunism, for which the world alone suffices to celebrate the glory of God, and to the tragic extremist thesis, which maintains that there is a radical contingency. He would use all of this in arguing that the world should have a sense commensurable with God, which was precisely to situate himself beyond the two preceding theses. In fact, the opportunistic thesis said that there was a sense but it was not commensurable, whereas the extremist thesis said that there was no sense. The problem was that the natural and finite world did not have a sense commensurable with God, and this was so for the reason already indicated, namely, the enormous disproportion between the finite and the infinite. To arrive at a sense commensurable with God the gap between the finite and the infinite had to be bridged. Now, you can add the finite to the finite, but it will always remain the finite. The gap between the finite and the infinite can only be bridged by the infinite. Consequently, the world plus God was necessary, the world needed to be such that God was in the world, in the strict sense: not that God should remain God outside of the world, but that God should be in the world. There was a modality of the finite existence of the infinite; hence the Incarnation was necessary.

We need to look closely, beyond the apparent theology, at this ontological feature of Malebranche's thought. Indeed, there are two completely fascinating characteristics involved here. First, it is an immanentist ontology. And, secondly, it ontology of the subject: in other words, being is subject.

An immanentist ontology. How should this be understood? Let's ontologize, if you will, the proposition and agree that "God" is the name of being. Malebranche's fundamental thesis is that, since being is infinite—to be understood, I repeat, not as your average theological thesis, but as a modern thesis—every effect of sense it supports, every effect of sense that might hypothetically be attributed to it, can only relate to itself. This is what I call immanentism. The radical infinity of being means that it has sense only with regard to itself. Consequently, the finite, the created, which is almost nothing—and we will see that this almost nothing is the whole question of the other—is fundamentally a mediation of the infinite. To the extent that the finite pertains to any sense, it is as a mediation of the infinite. That is to say, in terms of its destination, through the mediation of the finite, through the mediation of the created, the infinite is directed toward itself. No effect of sense can relate the infinite to the finite as such; every effect of sense only ever

relates the infinite to itself.

Now this mediation, the fact that the finite is a mediation of the infinite, is called “glory” by Malebranche. A strange name for designating the way the finite is the mediation of the infinite! And a good deal of Malebranche’s explanation consists in exploring this word. It is certainly a classical word of religious adoration. But what does it mean for the mediating relation of the finite and the infinite to be called “glory”? It is as if we were dealing with the God of a Corneille tragedy, who acts for his own glory, and in particular who thus does “almost nothing” for his own glory. It is clear that, in order for this truly to be glory, God must put himself into this almost nothing, or it won’t be glorious. Consequently, the infinite creates the finite, being creates its other, but this other must include the same, because if not, the act will have no sense. If the act is not comparable to the same of being, it is deprived of sense, that is, impossible. We can therefore speak of immanentism, in the precise sense in which there is an other only insofar as the same is of this other. By the way, what we encounter here is a Hegelian theme, which is that there is no pure disjunction, and that the alterity of the world with relation to God cannot be thought as disjunctive. The same must introject itself into the other. That is what the incarnation of God is. This immanentism is pre-Hegelian, and this is not the only time we will see affinities between Malebranche and Hegel.

Let’s turn now to what I have called “subjective” ontology. The categories of decision, sense or calculation are adequate for God. And so being qua being, subsumable under the name of God, is essentially a calculating subject. This is what Malebranche calls wisdom or order: the wisdom of God, or the submission of God to order. God is therefore a calculating subject. And since God is the name of being, we can say that, for Malebranche, being calculates. This is why he was repeatedly accused of inserting himself into God’s plans, of almost taking himself for God, of constantly saying: “God calculated this, he did this, he did not do this in such and such a way, he did the best thing, etc.” Malebranche was unruffled by these sorts of objections, since, for him, we actually see in God, in the strictest sense. There is therefore no mystery about how God calculates. But this nevertheless refers to something quite profound, that would affect everything that followed, namely that his ontology was “in a subjective mode.” We have to accept the principle of this. Being is subject, in this case a calculating subject, at a first level to be sure but, as we will see, it is also subject in every sense of the term. Only, what God calculates is, in fact, himself; he calculates nothing other than himself, he is the great calculator of himself. Even when he calculates with regard to grace or the world, ultimately he reckons only with himself. Therefore, God is a subject that is, in the

strongest sense, an autonomous subject. And there is implicitly in Malebranche's thought—this is obviously not how he expresses it—an extraordinary project of thinking being in this way, as autonomous subject.

This, too, is pre-Hegelian, but perhaps in a more radical sense than in Hegel, because the word “subject” is less substantializable, less circular. And of course, as for every subject, God's desire is referable to a law. Malebranche will not hesitate to write: “Order is the inviolable law of God.” You can see how far we are from the tragically capricious, incalculable, and transcendent God. We have this to reassure us: order is the inviolable law of God, God has laws. But what is profound is that he has laws because he is desire, because he is subject. And Malebranche, who is a very refined analyst of the subject—at the time, or a little before, they would have said a “refined psychologist,” refined psychologist of God—knows very well that to speak of desire without speaking of the law is a joke. In his own terms, there is no thought, no true comprehension, of the question of desire, even of God's desire, that does not have to refer it to a law. Lacan, for his part, says that desire is the correlate of the law. And, consequently, for Malebranche there is a deep unity between the fact that his ontology is in a subjective mode — which means he speaks of God's will, God's desires, God's calculations etc., as if he was right there with him – and the fact that God is subject to the law of order, that order is the inviolable law of God. These are not distinct terms; on the contrary, they are woven together.

All of this will allow us to understand creative action. It becomes clear if we take up the dialectic of desire and the law from the perspective of being. Faced with God's creation, it will be necessary to consider both what is at stake in God's desire and the law that must be postulated in order to think that desire. As usual, Malebranche's analysis of this issue will be balanced and impartial. Armed with this vision of things, he will conclude that, as a divine work, the creation of the world, under the action of God who acts for his own glory, should be considered perfect. “Perfect” is another way of saying “commensurable with the infinite.” Perfection is the possible commensurability with the infinite. But since all of this is “in the subjective mode,” we cannot be content with considering the result, *i.e.*, the world; we must consider the action qua action, the working action, the creative action. The subjective nature of the divine being is no doubt decipherable in terms of what it creates, but it can perhaps be even more deeply and intimately known in the creative action as such. Malebranche will therefore distinguish between two perfections with regard to the creation of the world: the perfection of the work and the perfection of making the work. Both are subject to the law, the

law of order. But the second is more important than the first. The perfection of the work is subordinate to the perfection of the working action, for the work is not God himself, whereas the working action is God himself, which makes it more essential to the divine nature. Malebranche here uses, and this is significant, the metaphor of the workman, the metaphor of fabrication. Here's what he writes:

An excellent workman should proportion his action to his work; he does not accomplish by quite complex means that which he can execute by simpler ones, he does not act without an end, and never makes useless efforts. From this one must conclude that God, discovering in the infinite treasures of his wisdom an infinity of possible worlds (as the necessary consequences of the laws of motion which he can establish), determines himself to create that world which could have been produced and preserved by the simplest laws, and which ought to be the most perfect, with respect to the simplicity of the ways necessary to its production or to its conservation (First Discourse, XIII).⁶

Two comments to begin with. First of all, the image of the workman is intended to establish that the excellence of being, its perfection, is ultimately decipherable in the principles of action and not in its object. After all, after fifty thousand attempts and six months, anyone can manage to build a table that stands upright, but that would not mean that he is a good workman. If someone else is capable of doing it in three hours, it's better, even if the object is ultimately identical. Therefore, in order to know in what sense God is perfect, it is not enough to consider the world; what matters is comparing the world to the principles, rules, and ways of its creation and maintenance. In reality, the created world, that is to say this material, finite almost nothing, will fundamentally obey the principle of the maximal simplicity of ways. This means that, for an overall comparable result, God will choose whatever requires the least work. And since, roughly speaking, worlds are more or less comparable insofar as finite worlds are all almost nothing, the principle of the simplicity of ways necessarily prevails. The results are more or less of the same order, that is, from God's perspective—in any case on the edge of the nothing. So if we compare these various products on edge of the nothing—what Malebranche calls the multiplicity of possible worlds —, the world God creates is the one obeying the maximal subjective principle, the one that testifies to his abilities as to the simplicity of ways.

This provides us with a first example of a balancing concept, one that concerns the thorny question of evil, the eternal theological question of evil. As usual when

he tackles a problem, Malebranche starts out by exacerbating it, and we have to give him credit for that. The problem of evil is absolutely typical. What is for theologians the traditional method of dealing with this question in the most “economical” fashion, so to speak? It is to claim that there is nothing positive in evil and that evil is pure negation. Examined in its being, evil is nothingness, it is disobedience, adulteration, privation of being, etc. According to the great Platonic tradition, it is also ignorance. No one is willingly wicked. Already for Plato, someone who does evil does it only because he does not know the good; if he knew the good, he would necessarily act accordingly. For all Platonist theologies, evil is traditionally understood as a privation of being. God is therefore not responsible for it, because, being responsible for being, he cannot be responsible for nothingness. If evil is nothingness, it cannot be imputed to the always affirmative movement of God, since God is the plenitude of being, including in his creation. In the old debate concerning the question of how to clear God of all responsibility for evil, this is the economical way of treating it. Starting from the intrinsic analysis of the essence of evil, you show that it is non-being, and for this very reason, God is absolved of all responsibility for it. What I am calling Malebranche’s exacerbation of a problem stems from the fact that he is never satisfied with this type of reduction. For him, evil is positive, and an evil action is an action that exists just as much as a good one. He refuses the convenience of the detour via non-being. There really are, in actual fact, things that are bad for man. There is evil, and this “there is” is a real “there is,” it is not a privation, a negation, a partial nothingness. As a result, he has to find what I have been calling “balancing” mediations on this issue. For we are on the verge of a total breakdown here. If evil is real, God is necessarily responsible for it; but how can he be responsible for evil without forfeiting his perfection? Malebranche’s answer is that the creation of the world has its founding perfection in the creative gesture, and not in its result. He recognizes very well that there is evil and that nothing is easier than identifying an objective imperfection in the world, but what must be understood is that the world contains only the evil made necessary by the perfection of creation. The creative gesture, which must obey the simplest possible laws, entails imperfections in the result, imperfections that God could of course make up for, but it would be at the price of an imperfection in his action.

Note that what underlies this, broadly speaking, is an aesthetic metaphor. Malebranche’s ontology is an aesthetics of being. Let’s read what he writes in one of the innumerable texts he devotes to the question: “God could, no doubt, make a world more perfect than the one in which we live.” That’s the exacerbation of

the problem: God could have made a more perfect world. He does not say: God made a perfect world, and all the evil in that world is a form of non-being. Let me continue:

God could, no doubt, make a world more perfect than the one in which we live. He could, for example, make it such that rain, which serves to make the earth fruitful, fall more regularly on cultivated ground than in the sea, where it is unnecessary. But in order to make this more perfect world, it would have been necessary that he have changed the simplicity of his ways, and that he have multiplied the laws of the communication of motion, through which our world exists: and then there would no longer be that proportion between the action of God and his work, which is necessary in order to determine an infinitely wise being to act; or at least there would not have been the same proportion between the activity of God and this so-perfect world, as between the laws of nature and the world in which we live; for our world, however imperfect one wishes to imagine it, is based on laws of motion which are so simple and so natural that it is perfectly worthy of the infinite wisdom of its author (First Discourse, XIV).⁸

In this aesthetic ontology, the balancing mediation consists in compensating for the particular objectivity of evil with the general value of the act. Subjective and practical perfection prevails over the particularities of the result. I'd like to point out in passing that the image of rain is absolutely essential and recurs constantly in Malebranche, especially in the *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, where we find two great images, that of rain and that of the temple. The rain will represent everything that can be characterized as particular phenomena in the world. It is the image, the metaphor of the distribution of things in the world, and it will also be the metaphor of the distribution of grace. And there we have a strict parallelism, for the natural problem of "Where does the rain fall?" there will be the supernatural problem of "Where does grace fall?" And just as rain falls on the sea and not only over cultivated ground, so too a vile person might receive sufficient grace while a good man might receive nothing at all. The metaphor of rain is generally the metaphor of apparent disorder, that is, in reality, of the appearance of contingency in this world that is, itself, not contingent. Malebranche's adherence to the mass line can be recognized here. That the weather, meteorology, is the figure of contingency is something any ordinary conversation teaches us, and choosing this metaphor in an overwhelmingly peasant culture, as France was at the time, is an undeniable element of communication with popular consciousness. It is completely in keeping with Malebranche's particular genius.

The other metaphor is the temple, and it's the opposite of the rain metaphor. The temple, with its ornaments, is architectonic perfection. It is the baroque church, the church in the sense of a religious building. It represents the other aspect of things, the ecclesial aspect, the necessary and glorious aspect. Just as there is a dialectic of the rain, the dialectic of the place where it falls, so too there is a dialectic of the temple, of the simplicity of its architecture and its ornamental profusion. The apparent disorder is an effect of the law of order to which the creative gesture is subject. It is a particular disorder, not an intrinsic one, and it cannot be attributed to divine wisdom. As wisdom, divine wisdom has to accept the predominance of the gesture over the work, for the gesture is this wisdom itself. Here, too, we have an application of the maxim to the effect that God acts only with regard to himself: his creative gesture is predominant over the work. Therefore order properly speaking, i.e., the infinite order, is inherent in the creative gesture. The particular disorder in the work, as a result of the order of the gesture, is only a disorder for us. We encounter once again the aesthetic metaphor. At bottom, what Malebranche says is this: when we look at the world, we are ignorant spectators. And if we are led to say: there's something off there, there's something ugly there, there's something sullied there, it is only because we do not understand the ultimate unifying principle of it all. If we understood that this fault is only the particular result of a general equilibrium, which is related to the essence of the gesture, then we could only admire it, including the evil. We would then become cultured people who are no longer taken aback by dissonance. We would know that this dissonance is merely the particular price to be paid for general perfection, not the perfection of the finished product, but of the principles that give rise to it, that is, by which it is and subsists.

So, there is ultimately only one unconditioned principle, one inviolable law of God. This unconditioned principle is the simplicity of ways. Anyone who produces effects by ways that are too complicated, that is, without thinkable proportions between the effect and these laws, is imperfect in his own order. In the case of God, his own order is the creation of the world. There are not many competitors, there is only one who, in Malebranche's eyes, is a very harsh judge of himself and constantly judges the aesthetic perfection of the gesture by the criterion of the simplicity of ways. We could also express this in the following way: the being-subject acts in accordance with general wills, that is, in accordance with a practical universalism. It limits as much as possible particular wills, because they are only adjustments, imperfect and irrational things. As a result, even the apparent particular imperfections lend support to this practical universalism. It could

be said about creation what Mao said about the revolution: “The creation of the world is not a dinner party.” The most important thing is that the creation of the world be commensurable with divine infinity. So we won’t object to this that there are some unfortunate people who do not receive their salvation or that the rain falls on the sea. If the general principle of the simplicity of ways, that is, of the perfection of the gesture, is predominant, and if the realization of this principle necessarily entails negative particularities, these negative particularities will pose no objection to practical universalism. They are its actualization and, as even Malebranche says, they contribute to its beauty. Here is the passage:

If then it is true that the general cause ought not to produce his work by particular wills, and that God had to establish certain laws of the communication of motion which are constant and invariable, through whose efficacy he foresaw that the world could subsist such as we see it, one can say in a very true sense that God wishes that all his creatures be perfect; that he wills not at all that children perish in the womb of their mothers; that he does not love monsters; that he did not make the laws of nature to engender them; and that if he had been able (by equally simple ways) to make and to preserve a more perfect world, he would never have established any laws, of which so great a number of monsters are necessary consequences; but that it would have been unworthy of his wisdom to multiply his wills in order to stop certain particular disorders, which even constitute a kind of beauty in the universe (First Discourse, XXII).⁹

The root of all of this is that, if the infinite is a subject, in this case a creative subject, it is not possible for its maxim to be a particular will, because a particular will would mean constantly correcting the bad particularities of the world, and that would tie the infinite once again to the finite. That’s an argument directed against the extremist theses, the theses on contingency and the irrational and constant intervention of God. Therefore, for an autonomous subject—and an infinite subject can only be thought by Malebranche as an autonomous subject—the maxim is to act in accordance with universal wills. Incidentally, note the proximity to the Kantian categorical imperative here. The Kantian categorical imperative orders us always to act as if the maxims of action were universal laws of nature. The principle of practical universalism is a crucial principle of Kantian ethics. We could therefore say that Malebranche’s God is also a moral God in Kant’s terms, namely, a God who acts in accordance with universal maxims. And this practical universalism is compossible with particular disorders.

We can therefore know that the world is as perfect as it can be, given that God acts in accordance with laws, that is, given that God desires the world. Don't think the world is imperfect because God doesn't care about it. We might be tempted to say: God is indifferent, he acts in accordance with general wills, and he could not care less what happens afterward. That would be the common-sense objection. But, as usual, this objection is inverted by Malebranche, who says that the exact opposite is true. What's needed is to take seriously the fact that the world has no sense unless such is God's desire and that, to the extent that creation is not a whim, inexplicable contingency, sheer nonsense, it is because it can be linked to God as subject. Now if God desires the world, we can make sense of this only if there are laws, and since these are laws for the infinite, they are general laws, universal laws. Malebranche understood perfectly well this strange but true point: to think that God acts by particular will, and therefore that he constantly meddles in everything, is actually to suppress him as a subject, whereas to think him profoundly as a subject is necessarily to think him in relation to a law. Not the law that he promulgates, but the law that he, in a certain sense, obeys: the law of his desire.

What Malebranche will undertake, now that the general framework has been constructed, is to show that these principles can be extended to the questions of salvation and grace. Before we get to that, I would like to give you two additional examples of what I call the balancing resolution of problems. We will begin today with his methodology that is characterized by exacerbation, followed by a balancing out.

The first important problem, which follows from what I just said, can be formulated like this: let's assume that the Incarnation, Christ, is the sense of the world, which amounts to changing Christ into a concept and Christianity into philosophy. If Christ embodies God's plan in creating the world, God therefore created the world solely so that Christ could be incarnated in it, for that alone was commensurate with his glory. How can we understand, then, that Christ as Redeemer, as the one who saves mankind from original sin, is abandoned to the Fall, that is, to human sinfulness, to Adam's sin? How can we do so without thinking that God wanted or willed the Fall, that he willed original sin? Remember that in Christian theology the Redeemer comes in order to raise mankind from its original lapse. Therefore, if God's plan is redemption, hence Christ, then God's plan is also the Fall. The problem has to do with God's plans, for the crime is humanity's as a whole, and original sin, permanently transmissible, represents the corruption of the world whose heart is man. Could God have willed the world to be corrupt, in

order to then redeem it from this corruption? This would be, at the very least, a cynical calculation, making humanity in a certain sense a victim in the service of God's glory. Malebranche does not completely shrink from this vision of things. That is the first problem.

But there is another problem, one that concerns the question of being and the event. There is eventness in Christianity, for if redemption, *i.e.*, Christ's incarnation, stems from mankind's fall and Adam's sin, and if Adam freely sinned—we relieve God of responsibility by saying: Adam sinned, but he could have not sinned—the result is that the Redemption was not calculable. It depends on the Fall's singular uniqueness. The strict orthodox doctrine says that God's benevolence consisted in sending a Messiah, a Redeemer, to relieve and raise up mankind from its fall, a fall that mankind went through by turning away from God, hence freely. In a way, an intervening event, a temporal inscription, then took place in the heart of Christianity: the Redemption, the coming of Christ, was the eventual sense given by God to another event, mankind's fall. As a result, one has the impression that Christianity is also a historicity, a divine intervention, a will to save man at the point of his fall and his abandonment. But if Christ is the ultimate sense of the world, this eventness is dissolved; there is longer that act by which God relieves and lifts up mankind by sacrificing himself. There is instead a general calculation, in which the Fall is only one element, one moment, itself calculable. In summary, there are two problems. 1) Is God responsible for the Fall? Did he will original sin and mankind's corruption? 2) Should Christianity be totally de-eventalized, dehistoricized?

With regard to these problems, Malebranche proceeds as he always does. Rejecting every mediating or intermediary solution, he begins by exacerbating the problem, and does so in two ways. First, he expressly posits that Jesus Christ is the first-born of creatures, and therefore that he precedes humanity. In the process, he clearly materializes the strategic function of Christ. For example, he writes: "Jesus Christ ...is the first-born of created beings, it is he who is their exemplar in the eternal plan of his Father,"¹⁰ or, elsewhere and more radically: "Jesus Christ ... is the beginning of the ways of the Lord."¹¹ He therefore totally assumes that Christ is the inaugural term. The de-eventalization and the anticipatory character of Christ, including of Christ as a creature, are affirmed. Indeed, it is not a matter of Christ as a project or a concept, but of Christ insofar as he was created before mankind. This goes to show the extent to which he is not dependent on the eventness of the Fall.

And then Malebranche exacerbates the problem even more by emphasizing that Christ derives from a different type of causality than the world vis-à-vis God. This point is related to the distinction between external and internal cause. He thus writes: “God, by the creation of the world, takes leave of himself so to speak.”¹² Therefore, even if it is ultimately a mediation, the world is in a position of external creation, whereas, concerning Christ, Malebranche speaks of the “immanent operations by which the Son is constantly engendered.”¹³ Christ not only anticipates the world but, in addition, the causality that engenders him is heterogeneous to the world’s causality, insofar as, for God, the world involves a taking leave of self, whereas Christ involves an immanent operation. And yet Christ is also God incarnate, therefore Christ is of the world. Here, we are caught up in an utterly extraordinary tension.

How does Malebranche balance all of this out, after having stretched the problem to its limit? Here again, in two different ways. We know that, in creating the world, being takes leave of itself in the finite—to borrow Malebranche’s formulation—exclusively for its own glory. We should never forget this fundamental axiom. The finite must be, if I can put it this way, as radically finite as possible, as mediocre as possible, if we want its infinite redemption to be glorious, the incorporation into that finite of the divine infinity to attest to the glory of God. In other words, the larger the gap to be bridged between finite and infinite, the more the infinite attests to its own glory in the finite, that is, in the other. Consequently, the world must be on the edge of nothingness, on the extreme edge of the nothing, and even as finite, within its very finitude, it must reveal its quasi-nothingness, in order for the Redemption by way of the Incarnation to be worthy of the glory of God. God’s plan cannot be a finite perfection, *i.e.*, a world ... We come back to the idea that, ultimately, the work matters little in comparison with the gesture. Finite perfection is an opportunistic thesis. In fact, God’s plan is all the more admirable if the world is a quasi-nothingness. It should be understood that the problem, which will attest to God’s glory, lies in the fact that God will incarnate himself in this quasi-nothingness. What counts is to manage to ensure that it is in this quasi-nothingness, in this absolute “on the edge of the nothing” that the world is, that God reveals and incarnates himself. It is, moreover for this reason that the symbol will be the cross, the humiliated God, the suffering God, subjected to the horror of the world. The glory of God will be all the more obvious to the extent that God will descend not into a world that works relatively well, but into a horrible world, where he will be subjected to horror and mediocrity, to the nothingness of this world. God observes the Fall impassively, although the Fall is partly freely chosen

and not entirely the result of calculation. But he has no reason to intervene to inhibit, interrupt, or limit the disaster, Adam's sin, the reign of injustice, because all of that is humanity's and the world's race to nothingness. Adam decided that the world was to be unjust, bloody, and terrible. But this is in no way incompatible with God's plan; on the contrary, it reinforces it. The farther the race into the nothing goes, the more the world will be on the edge of the void, and the more the Incarnation will testify to divine greatness and the glory of God. And Malebranche says so admirably. Speaking of God, he writes: "Remaining unmoved even as his Work is about to perish, he upholds with dignity the nature of the divinity in this way, and declares by his conduct that he is infinite and that the future Church sanctified in Jesus Christ is his true plan."¹⁴ If God, by a particular will, had attempted to interrupt the fatal consequences of the Fall and of Adam's sin—which of course he could have—he would have purely and simply deviated from his plan and therefore from his essence. It is in this race to the nothing of this world that the conditions of maximal possibility of divine glorification, self-glorification, are inscribed. That's the first point.

The second point concerns, this time, the immanent, eternal operation, that produces the Son as God, that produces Christ, an operator of God. The constant engendering of the Son is the engendering by God of his capacity to join with the finite, to incarnate himself. This is a relatively subtle point, grafted onto differences of causality. The engendering of the Son by the Father is not the creation of the finite itself, even though the Son is finite; it is the engendering of God's capacity to join with the finite. This is what I call an operator of God, a particular operator that makes him capable of joining with the finite. This capacity requires the nothingness of the world in order to function, because if the world were just, this operator would be devoid of sense and ultimately the sense of this operator is God's capacity for nothingness, a capacity that will be symbolized in Christianity by his death on the cross. The finite is nothingness. Christ is therefore this operator internal to being owing to which being becomes capable of nothingness. And it is the nothingness of the world, not its plenitude or relative perfection, that calls forth its use. Concerning the fact that God has impassively left the world in sin and let the Fall happen, Malebranche writes: "God did this so that his Son should have the glory of forming his Church from the nothingness of holiness and justice."¹⁵ The Church is: to be formed by Christ, the operator of God, out of the nothingness of justice and holiness, which fashions its glory. Therefore, in fact, what is at stake in this affair, and through which Malebranche corrects the perspectives after having radicalized them, is that the Christ-operator, as the

ontological operator, has essentially nothing to do with sin and salvation; it has to do with being and nothingness. It is an ontological operator before being an eschatological one. In other words, the nothing is the maximal mediation of being in terms of taking leave of itself.

Next time we shall see, as we continue with this issue, that what we have here is an elucidation of the word “glory.” Glory is what being derives from the Other, with a capital O. “Glory” connotes what, in being, derives from the nothing, because the Other of being, the place of the Other for being, is the nothing. Glory is therefore what being derives from the nothing. This is a very fitting definition of glory, and, to tell the truth, still very Cornelian. I will show that beneath its seemingly “noble” psychology, the concept of glory, too, is an ontological concept. We will study the consequences of all this for the fall/redemption couple as an operator of glory. And we will turn next to the question of the law, of the paradoxes of the law.

NOTES

1. Alain Badiou, *Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique*, 1986 (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 8. [All notes are those of the translator.]
2. *Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique*, 1986, 9.
3. *Le Séminaire. Malebranche: L'être 2. Figure théologique*, 1986, 22.
4. Nicolas Malebranche, *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second* (Paris : Sapia, 1837), p. 297. These lines are drawn from an "addition" to Malebranche's *Treatise* that is not reproduced in Patrick Riley's English translation.
5. Nicolas Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, tr. Patrick Riley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 112.
6. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 116.
7. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 116
8. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 116.
9. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 119-20.
10. *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 112.
11. *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second*, 38. This line is drawn from an "addition" to *Treatise on Nature and Grace* that is not reproduced in Patrick Riley's English translation.
12. *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second*, 38
13. Ibid. In the 1837 edition of Malebranche's *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second*, "immanent" is italicized.
14. *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second*, 299.
15. *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome Second*, 299.